

Rear Admiral Mac Showers, U.S.Navy (Retired), of Arlington, VA, was a caregiver for his wife, who died last year after 20 years with Alzheimer's disease. He cared for her at home until she became a nursing home resident in the later stages of the disease. He became a strong advocate for support groups during this experience, and continues support group participation, both for Alzheimer's disease as well as for Prostate cancer.

Statement

Caring for a family member suffering from a chronic disease is a challenging task that I had to face. I recognize that I am not alone in that task. Millions of American families must tend to the personal and medical needs of family members providing the best possible quality of life for as long as possible. That job is full-time and intensive.

Today, we are here to discuss the needs of caregivers. Caring for caregivers is not easy. No one can be an effective caregiver unless he or she takes proper care of himself or herself. In my case, as in most caregivers – this involves several actions.

- maintain a healthy lifestyle
- get adequate rest
- get regular exercise
- follow a healthy diet
- arrange for respite from the rigors of caregiving

So often these actions appear impossible to accomplish while caring for someone who requires devoted attention. But, I have found that it is as important to take care of yourself, as it is taking care of a loved one.

Some would say an obvious solution is to have alternate or substitute caregivers – but that is not easy. To hire aides or companions can be costly, it involves having otherwise strangers in the home, it frequently leaves the quality of care in doubt, or one must rely on other family members or friends who may not be available as needed.

When caring for my wife, I had to experiment with a large number of home companions or other arrangements before finding someone who I felt was capable and compatible. And, I have found that even in the best of circumstances, any given solution may be only temporary. So, it will always be a continuing problem, particularly for long-term care. There is an abundance of in-home care agencies in any large community, but use of these is at best on a trial-and-error basis.

Another solution that people recommend is respite – taking time off from caregiving – by taking your loved one to a day care facility, such as a senior center or other respite center. Available as this may be, it does require money, and a means of transportation, and trust that this facility understands and is qualified in caring for your family member. Some situations require 24-hour care where this solution is simply not feasible.

The most difficult decision I had to make as a caregiver was to recognize when I needed help, and could no longer provide the care my wife needed by myself. The decision to place my wife was traumatic. There was simply no other choice that was available.

I spent the better part of a year visiting nursing homes before I found one that had appeal to me, and one where I thought they would provide the quality care my wife deserved. There was also a lot to consider related to finances, such as who will pay for nursing care, and other services. It takes a lot of time to learn the different options available.

I have found that there are many people and resources available to caregivers to help – from financial planning, to locating affordable respite care, to locating home health care aides – but you need to reach out and ask for help. You shouldn't feel bad asking for help. I have found that by reaching out to others who are going through the same situation, such as through a support groups or a faith-based organization, you feel a lot better, and you are able to discuss caregiving problems with others who are intimately involved in your same situation.

I was not a believer in support groups until I went to one meeting, and at that time I became an instant convert.

Even after my caregiving responsibility ended, I continued to meet with support groups in order to share my experiences with others seeking counsel and advice. After my diagnosis with cancer, I was unable to find a support group for my problems, so I created one that met at my home. That group subsequently moved to Virginia Hospital Center and is still operating to serve the needs of hundreds of cancer survivors and their caregivers.

Any caregiver will find great comfort and assistance in a disease-specific support group where like problems and solutions are discussed. I recommend it in the strongest way.

This is a brief overview of matters of concern to family caregivers. But the most important point I want you to take home today is the mandatory need for each caregiver to put his or her own health and well-being first. You cannot be a reliable and available caregiver if you fail to do this.